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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 4507
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY 0069
RHFMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHMFIISS/COMUSKOREA J5 SEOUL KOR PRIORITY
RHMFIISS/COMUSKOREA SCJS SEOUL KOR PRIORITY
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0015

C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001371

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/09/2018
TAGS: PREL PHUM CU SY KS
SUBJECT: ROK TO SEEK CONSULAR RELATONS WITH CUBA AND SYRIA

REF: SEOUL 991 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: DCM Bill Stanton. Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a July 8 meeting with the DCM, ROK Deputy Foreign Minister Lee Yong-joon said that ROKG would soon begin negotiations on establishing consular relations with Cuba and Syria. DFM Lee was adamant, however, that this was not a first step toward full diplomatic relations with Cuba. End Summary.

CUBA

¶2. (C) DFM Lee Yong-joon told the DCM that for some time the ROKG had felt an acute need for an office in Cuba. Vacations in Cuba were becoming quite popular among South Koreans. Last year, some 4000 South Korean tourists had traveled to Cuba; some of them had lost their passports and were stranded for a considerable time. Also, Korean trade with Cuba was growing, now totaling some USD 200 million a year. Therefore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT) would soon begin negotiations on establishing consular relations with Cuba, DFM Lee said. This should not be seen as a first step toward establishing full diplomatic relations with Cuba, Lee emphasized. Rather, the consular office in Havana, staffed by 3 or 4 Korean officers, would simply function to meet the growing consular needs of South Korean tourists and businessmen. DCM told Lee that he would convey this information to Washington.

SYRIA

¶3. (C) DFM Lee said that Damascus had refused in the past to establish relations with Seoul because of its close relations with North Korea. South Korea had little or no interest in Syria. Still, the ROKG wanted a consular office in Syria to protect Koreans traveling or working in Syria. Lee said that a final decision had not been made, but that it was likely that MOFAT would soon approach Syria to begin negotiations.

COMMENT

¶4. (C) We have known for a while that MOFAT wanted to establish consular relations with Cuba (see refs), one of three countries with which it has no diplomatic or consular relations; the others are Syria and Macedonia (over its name). We would appreciate Washington's response, if any, to the ROKG's plan on Cuba. In regard to Syria, we suspect South Korea's newly felt need for a consular office is likely due to the presence of South Korean peacekeeping troops in

Lebanon. Given Syria's very strong bilateral ties to North Korea, ROK-Syria negotiations could take a long time.

VERSHBOW